

Why is the new, massive, high-powered show by the acknowledged founding father of video art touring the byways instead of the highways of American museums? Nam June Paik's "The Electronic Super Highway: Travels with Nam June Paik," recently at the Columbus Museum of Art, its third stop on a national tour, is almost a blockbuster. It includes 36 complex video sculptures, several of which are installations within installations, and more than 650 working video monitors and TV sets. If that accumulation of works does not quite add up to a blockbuster, the added effect of visual and audio energy provided by 650 rasters, countless speakers, and Paik's 30-beat-per-second editing rhythm, increases the density of the show to the point that it is almost impossible to take in. On one of my visits, the mother of a couple of grade-schoolers was leaning against a pedestal in the last room of the show, the room that contains photographs and reconstructions of Paik's earliest (and quietest) work. She volunteered that the show was too much for her, but that her active children, who were still exploring the exhibit, seemed to find such level of activity normal.

Paik has left an enviable record in the art world. He was welcomed into the elite of the avant garde at an early age, collaborating with Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and the Fluxus founders in their heyday. He created some of the icons of the '50s and '60s avant garde, with his smashed pianos and his Charlotte Moorman variations. He has generated a long trail of single-channel videos, famous performances, landmark exhibitions, and impressive catalogs, along with an extensive secondary critical literature. He has had the support of giant corporations and has produced giant works, including a piece designed for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul that contains over a thousand video monitors. His dealer, Carl Solway, reports that he may do a bigger piece for the Atlanta Olympics.

Why, then, is this show not playing in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago? One could try to answer that question in a journalistic way by exploring how the show was curated and put together, and by analyzing the relevant relationships within the art world. But there must be a larger reason.

To begin with, Paik's work is stuck at a crossroad defined by two diametrically opposed critical positions within the art world. The positive position is well-stated by two of Paik's earliest and most influential supporters: David Ross, the George Washington of video curators (from the Everson Museum in Syracuse, to the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and currently, as Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art); and John Hanhardt, the George Washington of film and video curators (the Walker Art Center, and for the last two decades, curator of film and video at the Whitney). Hanhardt has written repeatedly about the significance of Paik's work, and his 1982 Paik retrospective at the Whitney is one of the most significant events in Paik's career, as well as a major move for video in the art world. Hanhardt has always valued Paik's playfulness, humanism, inventiveness and positive attitude toward technological change and its potential instrumentality for social and cultural change. Hanhardt has celebrated Paik's global optimism, as well as qualities of generosity and leadership within the video-art movement. Hanhardt's article in a recent catalog lovingly reviews the major metaphors of Paik's vast outpouring, grouping his art objects under categories such as "organisms," which includes TV Garden (1974-78); "architectural arches," which includes Video Arbor (1989), an outdoor arch of monitors that has become overgrown with vines; "the [evolved] individual," which includes his original Robot K-456 (1964); "the [evolved] family," including

his Family of Robot (1986); and "the global village," which includes certain installations in the new show being reviewed here, such as SYS Cop (1994), E-Mail vs Snail Mail (1994), Video Server (1994), and Couch Potato (1994), the global village's policeman, postman, video store and typical resident, respectively.(1)

David Ross's early support for Paik's work is evidenced by his retrospective of Paik at the Everson in 1974; in a recent interview Ross conducted with Paik, Ross expressed a deep appreciation of Paik's historical accomplishment.(2) Ross sees Paik as the embodiment of a utopian moment in the 1960s when a generation of new artists and curators believed that technology could help change society; Ross has valued - and has helped establish - Paik as the first and grandest representative of that hope to infiltrate broadcast television stations and prestigious museums.

Paik's severest critics, however, have attacked the viability of, precisely, the utopian moment, the humanist hope for social change through technology. Martha Rosler has pointed out that historically the hope that "[i]n art and architecture, formalist modernism promised a healthier, more efficient and adaptive - and liberatory - way of life, for all classes," and that the "possibly revolutionary intent, to pave the way for democratic participation, could quickly turn into accommodation to new - technocratic - elites."(3) Rosler excoriates Paik's work and his "sanctification" by the art world, referring to Martha Gever's highly critical Afterimage article on Paik's "coronation" by Hanhardt and the Whitney Museum. Rosler points out that Paik's celebrated attacks on the corporate structure of society have in fact been a pulling together of "the two ends of the American cultural spectrum by symbolically incorporating the consciousness industry [corporate media; TV] into the methods and ideas of the cultural apparatus [art world; museums] - always with foundation, government, museum, broadcast, and other institutional support."(4) Acknowledging Gever, Rosler also points out that Paik's attitude toward technology is heroic and masculinist, fetishizing the female body (famously, Moorman's) and paying homage to artist-magicians and seers such as Cage, whose work Rosler terms "quietist." Like Gever, Rosler faults Paik for failing to analyze any specific TV messages or effects, or to provide a rational counterdiscourse to the technology on which he is dependent for his work. In the end, she calls Paik a "holy fool," referring to his role as a gadfly and cynic within the official structure of the court.

Rosler's disdain for the fool has been challenged by Woody Vasulka's disdain for grand oppositions: "[Dostoyevsky's] sincere cry for brotherhood . . . fell heavy and with great embarrassment under the wheels of socialism. We cannot possibly see a lesser scandal ushering in the next, the twenty-first century! If we cannot see the true giant on the shining path, let us pray for the fool."(5) Vasulka cannot trust any large vision, such as the socialist one he infers from Rosler's critique, and so sides with the fool.

Catherine Lord, in her Afterimage review of a major show of video installation in New Mexico in 1983, focused on the relation of video to modern sculpture. Underlying her focus, however, was the same concern expressed by Gever and Rosler for museumization of video art and the consequent reduction of the range, but more importantly, the critical position of the art form:

my educated guess is that it's wishful thinking to expect video artists to take on the project of cultural deconstruction. Just as telling as the fact that there were no politically directed works in the show is the fact that in the works that attempted to deal directly with social issues ([Robert] Gaylor, [Rita] Myers, [Francesc] Torres, [Juan] Downey, [Michael] Smith) the analysis was weak, sometimes to the point of escapism.

Though Paik was not included in this show, her list of artists whose social commentary is weak or escapist extends Gever's and Rosler's critique of Paik to a wider field. Lord compared the critically crippling effect of museumization of video art with the history of photography as art:

... as the use of video is increasingly institutionalized as "video art," the options narrow considerably. If the field of sculpture was considerably enlarged by the advent of video, what's coming to be defined as the sculptural use of video preempts many of the other incarnations that lend the art a certain power - documentary, narrative, even the strategic use of a broadcast function. In a related situation, photography paid a heavy price to win the label of art. but then, history is usually inclined to repeat itself.(6)

While Hanhardt and Ross celebrated the entry of video art into the museum, Rosler and Gever decry museumization of video art as an unhealthy professionalization, and dismiss Paik's high-tech innovations as a virtual research and development division of the mainstream consciousness industry. Paik's critical reputation is therefore stuck between these extreme positive and negative poles, a position that Vasulka feels, under the circumstances, is honorable. Paik's position is, in any case, symptomatic of a larger condition that faces artists and intellectuals. The hope and optimism that characterizes Hanhardt and Ross's appreciation of Paik is not much different from that "affirmative character of culture" that Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt school dismantled in the 1930s as a false and naive faith in the progress of liberal political-economy toward democracy.(7) The Marxist negativism of the Frankfurt School critics has been itself assailed by the left, but no consensus has emerged as to the nature of or path toward any realistic "affirmativism." Artists and intellectuals are both stuck in an ill-defined, non-directional "postmodernism," struggling with a moment in history in which derelict communisms have imploded into a worldwide capitalist inferno, and socialism seems at best still centuries in the future, and at worst an embarrassing fantasy.

Since there is no visible opposition to the new order, it is doubtful whether the cloverleaf of postmodernism is dialectical; it seems a dilemma. Rosler quotes Alvin Gouldner's version of the predicament:

the schismatic character of the modern consciousness [is a] highly unstable mixture of cultural pessimism and technological optimism," in which the "impotence and isolation of the cadres of the cultural apparatus [the NEA; museums; artists] grounds [sic] their pessimism in their own everyday life, while the technicians of the consciousness industry [TV; Windows 95] are surrounded by and have use of the most powerful, advanced, and expensive communications hardware, which is the everyday grounding of their own technological optimism.(8)

This dilemma is related to one of the perennial questions of socially progressive artists; whether to work inside or outside the "system." Whether, for example, as an African American filmmaker, one should make small, uncompromised films, such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), for a hungry, appreciative, minority-sized audience; or whether one should make mainstream films, such as Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992), that anybody can appreciate but that compromise, through expensive production values, *Malcolm X*'s own commitment to the ascetic lifestyle necessary to his radicalism. As Rosler points out, "'production values' mean the expenditure of huge amounts of money on production and postproduction. And the costs of computerized video editing, quickly becoming the standard in video-art circles, surpass those of (personal) film editing in factors of ten." Rosler, in fact, concludes her article against the utopian moment with the recommendation that the dilemma be solved by the artists' and intellectuals' choosing to work outside the system. In spite of this recommendation, she leaves the dilemma quiveringly alive with her final line: "Obviously the issue at hand as always is who controls the means of communication in the modern world and what are to be the forms of discourse countenanced and created."(9)

There will always be a big system; the factors of 10 will be factors from now on. We will have choices as to whether to work inside or outside that system, or both;(10) both Gever and Rosler chose to work on the outside, and claim that Paik is working on the inside. Gever quotes Paik on the inevitability of elite art: "There are Yang people and Yin people. Yang people create mass art (like Rock music), and Yin people create aristocratic, elitist and snobbish art. These differences will continue even if the visual arts establish a multiplication system equivalent to today's music industry."(11) In concluding that "Paik must be a Yin person," Gever implies that Paik here is in contradiction with his optimistic message about the human-scale, utopian potential of technology. Hanhardt and Ross, speaking from inside the system, celebrate the fact that Paik is nearer the controls of society, and that his forms of discourse have a chance to help redirect society for the better.

The choice to work inside or outside the system is less important than the choice of what to work for with regard to the system. The arguments of Gever and Rosler are cogent; owing to the huge imbalances of power in the consciousness industry and other cultural systems, the imbalances represented by Rosler's factors of 10, political resistance and government regulation seem called for. But resistance can, and should, take many forms. Paik's acknowledgment that there will always be mass art (like Rock music) and elitist art (like Cage's music), is probably true, and probably a good thing. Paik's way of putting his ideas is often unrigorous - "There are Yang people and Yin people" is banal. But Paik throws off aphorisms as part of a general smokescreen that allows him to be the trickster that he is; it is appropriate to object to this working method or adopted role, as Rosler does in calling him a holy fool. But it does not seem fair to conclude, as Gever does in the last line of her essay, that Paik, because he is successful in the museum world, is a Yin person. For one thing, he is deafly Yang as well; for another, the conclusion partakes of the banality of Paik's original statement. And it is not fair to imply that elitism, in the form of honors, exhibitions, and resources, is inherently a bad thing, or an unworthy objective for an artist. Gever's observation that many of Paik's contemporaries in technological and conception innovation, such as Stephen Beck, Peter Campus, Bill and Louise Etra, James Seawright, Eric Siegel, Aldo Tambellini, Start VanDerBeek and Walter Wright (and one could add the Vasulkas, Dan Sandin, Tom DeFanti, Tom DeWitt, Vibeke Sorenson, Jane Veeder, Ed Emshwiller and

others), are unfairly left out of the accounts of the history of technology-centered video art is a fair observation, but not fair specifically to Paik. Paik has always acknowledged such people. Whether one is pro-Paik or not, it is incontestable that his current elite position is in great part the result of his having produced and propagated more and often better work than any of those listed above, and produced it over several important eras of video art. Paik's superstar status is a testament to his ability to play the system, as Gever implies, but it is also a testament to the fact that he is just more interesting, productive and accessible than most of the video artists who have identified themselves with the artistic potential of media technology, per se.

This is not to claim Paik is above criticism. On the contrary, more criticism of the work itself is what is needed. The kind of dopey philosophizing about yang and yin that Gever rightly disdains, is, in spite of its kernel of truth, the worst aspect of Paik's work. Paik's utopian ideas about humanizing technology have virtually no chance of describing, much less affecting, the power imbalances that create and administer that technology. The electronic superhighway he celebrates in the new show as a kind of liberating force is just the newest manifestation of the old material arrangements of production and consumption. His analogy between the e-highway and the human synapses is messy, like his work, and just as specious in its optimism. Considering where the human synapses themselves have landed us so far in history, that analogy provides no basis for hope. And the fact that Paik can create visions of creativity and zones of liberation within those arrangements is a triumph of the merest survival, not a triumph for the progress of mankind toward a better system. The utopian vision allows Paik to work, and informs his work, but it is not a believable aspect of his work.

Paik's work is, however, attractive for its rebellious messiness, childishness, childlikeness, and hidden surprises; its delight in handmade spectacle and Promethean fire-stealing; its genuine reverence for certain types of artistic experience such as Cage's, Beuys's, and Julian Beck's sublime "enlightenment"; and for a kind of resurgent, refusnik, naivete itself. Paik is castigated for undressing Moorman in public, but he also reveals (in his videotape document of a performance of Cage's 26'1.1499") his own vulnerability when he fits himself out as a torso-cello and snuggles up to "be bowed," all perhaps as an understandable excuse to bury his face in Moorman's neck. It adds a worthy page to the Kama Sutra.

Gever states that Paik's work needs more substantial analysis of its structural relation to other artists and theoreticians, which she undertakes to provide in order to supply some of the historical and social factors that are left out in the construction of the myth of his creative genius. Gever's analysis of Paik's relative dependency on certain politically naive art movements based in modernism, and on his naive position in relation to postmodernism, is an important debunking of certain large claims for Paik's work.

Robert C. Morgan's contribution to the catalog for "The Electronic Super Highway" makes the kind of claims that Gever's essay deflates. Morgan offhandedly compares Paik's Piano Piece (1993) to Picasso and Braque because of Paik's imagistic fragmentation of a musical instrument. Morgan repeats the modernist, humanist vision of technological utopia that drives Paik's work:

Television could become a humanistic tool in the hands of the artist, a tool capable of transforming society - not toward an anti-intellectual cynicism or oppressive dictatorship, but

toward new applications of interactive informational exchange, new horizons of cognition and purposeful speculation . . . Television, at its best, could allow a refined and sophisticated definition of culture that encompasses both East and West. It could provide the necessary linkages between East and West (and elsewhere) through a new ideographic system of cultural exchange. At its social and economic best, television could assist in giving the mind back to body, in giving thought back to language, and in giving consciousness back to action.(12)

These are inflated claims and vague speculations. Inflation and vagueness inhere in terms such as "refined and sophisticated" and "purposeful," in concepts such as "new ideographic system," and in values such as "its social and economic best." Terms such as "mind back to body," "thought back to language," and "consciousness back to action," masquerade as solutions, but are merely statements of real, but complex, problems of alienation. Any serious attempt to understand the terms and concepts employed in this paragraph would render its optimism as despair.

"The myth of Paik's creative genius" that Gever seeks to historicize is also perfectly exemplified by Morgan:

In retrospect one can see Global Groove as a kind of video masterpiece, a multicultural extravaganza that is fully energized, rhythmical, and both visually and aurally engaging. The cuts between the pulsating pop music of Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, John Cage reading a lecture, traditional native American chanting and drumming, Buddhist chanting and finger cymbals by poet Allen Ginsberg, a TV cello performance of Charlotte Moorman, a Korean drum dance, and Japanese Pepsi commercials, give the viewer a wide spectrum of information through a bricolage of sensually optical entertainment effects.(13)

No detailed analysis of this paragraph is needed to point out that the described work could be either a masterpiece or a bad student film. The paragraph that follows this one in Morgan's essay supplies a more theoretical foundation for his claims, but relies on virtually New Age terms such as "trans-sensory" and "intuition"; his final, anchoring term is an unexplained "infrastructure." This kind of criticism is badly in need of Gever's (polite) and Rosler's (brutal) demurrals.

Patricia Mellencamp's recent Art Journal review of Paik, which focuses on some of the work that comprises "The Electronic Super Highway," is enthusiastically positive, though a close reading suggests to me that she has serious misgivings about Paik's conceptual underpinnings. Regarding Paik's early remarks about "the glories of interactive media . . . and information . . . [in relation to] art," Mellencamp points out that

in the 1990s we hear the praises of "interactive media and information" sung by corporate CEOs more than hackers or artists. One paradox of contemporary culture is the gradual shift of such notions as technology from left activism to right conservatism. Today corporate culture has adopted verbatim and for profit the techno dreams of the 1960s video visionaries.(14)

Mellencamp had already pointed out Paik's position on the artist's relation to late capitalism by quoting Paik as having said, "In the 1930s the artist was the enemy of capitalism, in the 1990s, the artist may be the SAVIOR of capitalism (this is for Hans Haacke!)."(15) Mellencamp's seeming demurrals about Paik's ideological position, along with everything she says leading up

to her conclusion about Paik a half-page later, place that conclusion in profound contradiction: "For me [Mellencamp concludes] Paik is a mediator, an inventor of art machines, and a maker of pointed statements." Any positive sense of this weak praise is contradicted by Mellencamp's cogent critique of the meaning of those art machines and pointed statements.

At the same time, however, there are many admirable artists whose work is elitist, poorly rationalized and politically naive. The remainder of this essay will look closely at some of Paik's work in the current show and see what and who it represents, and whether it can offer any way of understanding the critical dilemma in which it is stuck.

First of all, Paik is not really a very good single-channel video artist. His single-channel video is seldom incisive or compelling and is most recently rarely even the real point of his work, even though it is called video art. More important is the way he arranges his single-channel video pieces in performances, sculptures and installations. In those contexts, he is interested in effects (seldom in causes), in ruptures and surprises, and in concepts.

Interrogating the meaning of the video aspects, per se, of Paik's individual pieces produces underwhelming results. For example, the active video monitors that comprise the eyes and teeth of the Internet Dweller mask titled wol.five.ydpb (1994), play a loop of montaged TV extracts. The video is more an idea of the experiencing of TV than an incisive analysis of TV, or even a careful work of art, per video. Video is not the medium of the art, but a medium in a mixed-media work in the old-fashioned sense. It is like the real bedspread in a Robert Rauschenberg painting of a bed. The same montage of TV is likely to turn up in other sculptures and installations in the same show, or in other shows, since Paik reuses video compositions perennially. There is nothing inherently problematic with any of these practices so far. In fact, certain of the effects of Paik's use of video in the mask work well; when the video loop comes to an end and the laser is being recycled, the video monitors go blank. The effect on the viewer is of a loss of psychic energy, a living dullness that signals that Paik's vision of technologically mediated life still has its dark side, in spite of his cheerful spiel. That zoned-out effect also links the Internet Dwellers, and many other superhighway travelers and global villagers, with the exhibition of the zoned-out Couch Potato in the next room.

It also links the Internet Dweller and the Couch Potato to the giant electronic billboard, Rt.66 BBS (1994), immediately next to the mask. Whether intentional or not, the spectacular, super-saturated, hyperactive pile of 84 Samsung monitors all vying for attention conjures up an overheated consumerism, like all the advertisements in the world concentrated in one roadside billboard. That speeding billboard suggests, in the context of the zonked-out Internet Dweller next to it, an image of drug dependency, including tolerance. Just as drug tolerance causes the body to require larger and larger doses, Paik's art seems to suggest that such tolerance is also an aspect of consumerist media technology. The problem is that Paik is in contradiction with the criticism inherent in that suggestion - his work calls for, and progressively uses, more drugs. His philosophical visions of technology, and his material piles of monitors and laser players, get larger and larger; if he creates works at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York any larger than the giant multimonitor map of the United States that occupies it now, the gallery will have to move to new quarters. Paik's work at the level of spectacle grows with every return of the Olympic games. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong or inartistic about that, but it is in

opposition to the darker aspects of the expanding media as a drug-tolerance problem. Paik may feel he is addressing just that problem, but the level of his analysis (his writings) does not approach the necessary complexity, and the level of synthesis (his art) contradicts any implied solution.

The mask itself of the Internet Dweller is beautifully conceived and executed, full of admirable transformations of found objects and surprising jolts of esoteric recognition. The forehead is composed of two upside-down 1950s-era TV consoles with eight legs rising to form a crown and video monitors forming eyes in the side by side consoles; the control dials run along the "headband" of the crown like a row of jewels - "crown" jewels that, as knobs, control the mind. The ears are formed of perforated board and wavy green neon, with earrings of many-stranded, multicolored electrical cable. The effect is of a "primitive" mask composed, as many have been after the intrusion of Western civilization into "primitive" societies, of found and bartered Western objects. Needless to say, the piece "comments on" the uses of primitivism in turn-of-the-century modern art, as well as suggesting the return of our globe to "village" life, via the Internet.

One of the stunning surprises to be found in the collage is the nose, composed of an old, nineteenth-century magic lantern. Not only does the magic lantern suggest that the mask could outwardly project the images in the video monitors that light up its eyes and teeth, but it could also produce real smoke from its nose, like a pop idol from Raiders of the Lost Ark. The magic lantern also conjures up the pre-history of the moving image, and enhances the connection between future and past, New Age and Ancient, all of which suggest magic in the mask. In the videotape catalog for the show, Paik says that masks have proliferated in all civilizations because people want to be someone else, they "don't like who they are." That observation could also be used to explain the broad, historical attraction of the magic lantern, movies, television, and, potentially, video. The mask as a not-liking of the self is another dark side to Paik's vision that is less virulently in contradiction with his artistic drive; that darkness, however, is probably not illuminable within the conceptual apparatus of Paik's work, which does not address causes as incisively as it does effects.

The manifold effects, ruptures, surprises and concepts of Paik's work continue throughout the show. Lori Zippay, director of Electronic Arts Intermix in New York, has pointed out (in conversation) the delight in discovering that the show is structured narratively to lead the viewer in the end to Paik's relatively sublime earliest works, such as the single-monitor TV-Buddha and TV-moon pieces that appear in the last room of the show's installation. One can also be surprised by the loops of computer-generated morphing of the faces of U.S. presidents, which are truly disturbing for anyone who has ever, even as a child, felt any identification with those presidents. Paik's morphing is reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's strange, film-like, racial devolution of the presidents in the mid-1800s:

The lean, slender American, pale and swarthy, if exposed to the sun, wears a very different appearance to the full, round Englishman, of clear blonde complexion. One may trace the progress of this difference in the common portraits of the American Presidents. Just study those faces, beginning with WASHINGTON; and as you come thro' the JEFFERSONS, the ADAMSES, and the MADISONS, you will find an increasing bony and wiry appearance about



those portraits, & a greater remove from that serene amplitude which characterizes the countenances of the earlier Presidents. I may be mistaken, but I think this is a correct index of the change going on in the nation at large - converting Englishmen, Germans, Irishmen, and Frenchmen, into Americans, and causing them to lose, in a common American character, all traces of their former distinctive national peculiarities.(16)

To watch, in Paik's videotapes, John F. Kennedy becoming Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter becoming Ronald Reagan, and George Bush becoming Bill Clinton is upsetting; where does the Bush icon end and Clinton begin? Where is the morphing taking them, and us? One's reaction suggests the unconscious social power of the image as discussed by Daniel Boorstin in the 1960s, the psychological power of the icon as a medium for deep political identification. Here Paik's work seems particularly effective in connecting with high, computer technology to crack open a mysterious effect related to the "primitive" masks (that he also morphs in another video loop).

But the contradictions do continue. The video image of Paik driving a decrepit Volkswagen minibus (Nomad, 1994) into a world where concrete highways are going to be "obsolete," coupled with the biographical fact that Paik is a terrible driver and is incapable of negotiating the freeways of Los Angeles is funny and charming. But the implication that life will be better, more utopian even, on the electronic version of our superhighways remains undemonstrated in Paik's work. The fact that more people will perform their salaried work via home computers and will thus do their commuting on the Internet, may save some fossil fuel, some trees, and may prevent some pollution, as Paik claims, or it may not. Who knows what the effect on international travel and use of resources will be when humans are confined to their monitors for their workdays? We know some of the effects of gridlock, but less of the effects of chronic cabin fever. In fact, Paik, who is quite directly, if ironically, referring to his perpetual globe-trotting, is himself a great expender of jet fuel. And Paik's numerous artistic statements in this show concerning saving trees (More Log-in: Less Logging, 1993) and conserving gasoline (Burn Calories not Octane, 1993; Tele-commuting: From Bali to Broadway, 1992) are all supported by oversized power cables that were specially installed by the American Electric Power Company, which is also covering some of the increased cost of electricity for the museum. Even if the net use of power in Paik's visionary future were reduced through reliance on the electronic superhighway, Paik's art itself would remain an ecological offender in its own terms.

One credits Paik for the prescience of his 1976 Rockefeller report that called for the electronic superhighway that would indeed become a major technological project of the 1990s. Paik is justified in claiming the e-highway for the title of this show, and claiming Clinton and Al Gore as collaborators. But surely by now it is right to ask how society and daily life have changed for the better since the realization of Paik's recommendations of 1976. It is not at all clear that the collapse of communism, and the triumph of MTV that Paik celebrates is a good thing; that situation leaves accumulated capital in complete control with no oppositional political culture.

Paik seems to acknowledge some of these criticisms in the last paragraph of his final statement in the published catalog: "Needless to say, High Tech is not a panacea. It is just a local anesthetic. There will be many unforeseen problems ahead" This disarming disclaimer, however, would appear to contradict the spirit of Paik's art; this disclaimer certainly is contradicted by the

insertion of a "last word" in the catalog by, presumably, the editors - a print-world voice-of-God narration: "Nam June Paik plans to continue to surprise us well into the twenty first century. We may not be able to predict what the new medium will look like, but we can know one thing for certain: Nam June will find a way to subvert it, manipulate it, transform it; until the technology and art are one."

There is no suggestion that it might take more than surprises and holy foolishness for art to subvert technology. And even if it did, Paik's art and his supporters' philosophy fail to confront the malaise identified by Jack Burnham in 1980 in analyzing his own curatorial career in the fields of art and technology:

My experiences with semiology and iconography lead me to believe that the enormous vitality and will-to-change behind Western art is in a sense an illusion, just as technology harbors its own illusionary impulses. Only within the past ten years have we begun to accept the possibility that technological solutions are not universal panaceas. Gradually but surely, much of it in unspoken terms, we are beginning to accept evidences that scientific research and technological invention have their boundaries. Such a speculation would have been nearly unthinkable fifteen years ago when scientific grants were plentiful and the avant garde was the key to artistic success. Perhaps technology is only a matter of man-made or artificial negentropy which, because of its enormous and productive capacity and ability to aggrandize perception into convenient and coherent packages of "information," we perceive as invincible, life-stabilizing, all-meaningful, and omnipotent.(17)

In other words, what if art and technology do become one? What if artists were to "save" capitalism? From Burnham's point of view, art and technology are both sick - art "constantly moving away from clarity and resolution, and towards chaos and materialism [;t]echnology placing its *raison d'etre* in empiricism, that tends to lead it towards its worst enemies, paradox and meaninglessness." Thus, the goal of making art and technology one may be deeply redundant: "while art and technology show signs of mutual exclusiveness, at the level of anagogic significance they may actually be completely tautological."(18)

However one feels about the mythic and the anagogic as a basis for art and criticism, there is a sense of rightness about Burnham's assessment of the larger project that Paik's art has pursued. That sense of rightness extends, uncomfortably, to Burnham's belief that "the enormous vitality and will-to-change behind Western art is in a sense an illusion;" and I would add "Western art criticism" to that last thought, since most of us critics are implicated in Burnham's general critique. As artists, curators and critics, we have not prepared ourselves in a way that would warrant optimism should art and technology become one.

Paik's ironic celebration of the electronic superhighway - through his joke about his minibus, and through his installation representing futuristic information institutions such as schools (Warex Academy, 1994), town halls (Cyberforum, 1994), post offices (E-mail vs Snail Mail), and video stores (Video Server) - offers no incisive, compelling examples of how the received form and content of future communications, per se, will be an improvement over the present. What, in fact, is the psychological, social and political content of those futuristic institutions? What will be taught, debated, mailed or watched that we should celebrate and work toward now? That is what

avant-garde art needs to be exploring. In spite of the attractiveness and ingeniousness of much of this show, it offers no answers to those questions. Paik's work does not answer the dilemma of postmodernism; it does not suggest a way out of its own current entrapment between the extremes of the inflated critical claims, that encourage continuation of artistic accumulation, and the hard critical questions that would demand lean and mean forays into new territory. That - paradoxically enough, given the anti-museumization argument that has been directed against Paik - is perhaps why this extremely impressive museumization of video art is traveling the interstates between the coasts.(19)

## NOTES

1. John G. Hanhardt, "Non-Fatal Strategies: The Art of Nam June Paik in the Age of Postmodernism," in *Nam June Paik: Video Time - Video Space*, Toni Stoos and Thomas Kellein, eds.; English-language ed., Robbie Capp, ed., (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).
2. David Ross, "A Conversation with Nam June Paik," in *Nam June Paik*.
3. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" (1985-86), reprinted in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, (New York: Aperture and Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990), p. 38.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
5. Woody Vasulka, "The New Epistemic Space," in *Illuminating Video*, p. 470.
6. Catherine Lord, "It's the Thought that Counts," *Afterimage* 11, no. 3, p. 11.
7. Rosler points this out, p. 46.
8. Alvin Gouldner in Rosler, p. 50.
9. Rosler, p. 50.
10. We also may have choices about working for it or against it, whether from inside it or out. One of my recommendations would be government regulation.
11. Paik, quoted in Gever, "Pomp and Circumstances: The Coronation of Nam June Paik," *Afterimage* 10, no. 3, p. 16.
12. Robert C. Morgan, "Paik's Fragments," in *The Electronic Super Highway: Travels with Nam June Paik*.
13. Morgan, p. 10.
14. Patricia Mellencamp, "The Old and the New," in a special issue of *Art Journal* on video art, John G. Hanhardt and Maria Christina Villasenor, eds., Winter 1995, p. 46.

15. Mellencamp, p. 46.

16. The Frederick Douglass Papers. Series One. Speeches, Debates and Interviews. Vol. I, 1841-46, John W. Blassingame, ed., (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 514-15; quoted in unpublished manuscript by Gayle McKeen, "The Language of Self-Help in African-American Political Thought."

17. Jack Burnham, "Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed," in Video Culture: A Critical Investigation, John G. Hanhardt, ed., (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), pp. 243-44; originally published in The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture, Kathleen Woodward, ed., (Madison, WI: Coda Press, 1980).

18. Burnham, p. 247.

19. This analysis is based on an excellent installation of the Paik show at the Columbus Museum of Art. I want to thank that museum's deputy director, Dennison Griffith, along with Carl Solway and Lori Zippay for their assistance. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Joan Greenstone.

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